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## JOSEPH RITSON : A ROMANTIC ANTIQUARIAN

The historians of Romanticism have done scant justice to its antiquarian interests. And yet these constituted a natural part of the romantic programme. Since the Romantic period was in its own way an Age of Reason, we must postulate a romantic intellect as well as a romantic imagination. Of course the liberated mind of Romanticism was not singly devoted to militant criticism of institutional Christianity and organized society. Nor did the keen air of the new life stimulate merely large constructive efforts, such as went to the making of Hegel's encyclopædic achievement. In Germany, notably, this age produced the philologist as well as the philosopher. And so it is at every new birth of the spirit. Bacon as well as Shakespeare belongs to those spacious times of Elizabeth; and in the dawn of the great Renaissance scholars and scholar-poets are observed deciphering the records of Greek and Roman thought. In the time of that later birth which we call Romanticism, the Germanic past received similar if not such absorbing attention.

In Great Britain the antiquarian spirit was abroad to an extent not yet adequately recognized. The antiquarian societies of England, Scotland, and Ireland were actively engaged in studying the topographical and architectural antiquities of their respective countries. Men like Pinkerton gave much attention to the early history of the Germanic and Celtic peoples as recorded in historical and literary monuments. Richard Gough wrote a well-known treatise on sepulchral monuments, and there were innumerable books on the subject of numismatics. The ballad craze, we should remember, was only one phase of a widespread interest in antiquities. So strong, indeed, was the antiquarian spirit that it took firm hold of the dilettante and the virtuoso, as in the case of Walpole and Beckford; and it fired the great imaginative and creative minds of Gray and Scott. Godwin, too, was an antiquarian in his way. Since, then, the connection is so close between imaginative literature and antiquarian research, the latter deserves very careful consideration.

The great Johnson himself overlooked, of course, neither

antiquities nor antiquarians. Although he defined a mere antiquarian as "a rugged being," we find him in 1779 writing to Boswell in the following strain: "If you would, in compliance with your father's advice, enquire into the old tenures and old charters of Scotland, you would certainly open to yourself many striking scenes of the manners of the middle ages. The feudal system in a country half-barbarous is naturally productive of great anomalies in civil life. The knowledge of past times is naturally growing less in all cases not of public record; and the past time of Scotland is so unlike the present, that it is already difficult for a Scotchman to imagine the economy of his grandfather. Do not be tardy or negligent; but gather up eagerly what can yet be found." But long before the time of his letter Johnson ridiculed the whole brotherhood of antiquaries in his account of that famous club which consisted of Hirsutus, who when serious quoted *Trevisa*, when merry the *Ship of Fools*; Ferratus, who was collecting halfpennies; Chartophylax, who spent seven years perfecting a series of Gazettes; and Cantilenus, who "turned all his thoughts upon old ballads, for he considered them as the genuine records of the national taste. He offered to show me a copy of *The Children of the Wood*, which he firmly believed to be of the first edition, and by the help of which, the text might be freed from several corruptions, if this age of barbarity had any claim to such favors from him."

In England, as is to be expected, the interest in the past produced the literalist more often than the philosopher. "In England," writes Professor Herford, "excessive preoccupation with ideas has always been a less pressing danger than a too concrete concern with facts." When Warton attempted a history of English poetry the result was conspicuous for its lack of coherence and centralization; although the book is to this day a valuable thesaurus. Among the ardent English literalists who devoted themselves to their country's past, one of the most interesting is Joseph Ritson. His literalism amounted to a fanatic, an almost apostolic, zeal to keep the ancient record straight. His was not the cold temper that the philosophical Godwin lamented in antiquarians. As a result, though his romantic zeal for the letter and his angry championship of truth

sometimes led him astray, the permanent value of his unremitting campaign against elegant imposture and amiable inaccuracy is hard to overestimate. If it is true—according to a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*—that there was at this time “a prevailing maxim that no author is to be told of his faults plainly, but we must use a kind of polite literary periphrasis,” an exception to the rule was furnished by Ritson's sharp decision of manner.

The mere text of Ritson's life is brief, but it suggests an interesting commentary. It tells the old story of a misalliance with the law and the all too familiar narrative of ambition restricted by poverty and eccentricity darkening into insanity. Always without a competence, he lost near the close of his life most of his little property. That he was a rabid vegetarian we know from many of his letters and a half-mad pamphlet; and that he was one of those whom De Quincey calls orthographical mutineers, several of his disfigured works testify. In the course of his life he was both Jacobite and Revolutionist, coming to address his friends as “citizens” and to employ the revolutionary calendar. But these were his hobbies. As we have said, his real business was with manuscript and black-letter records.

His transcriptions of these were brought together in several important collections, which answered to no strict classification, ballads and songs and merry tales appearing in the same volume. Nor did he restrict his editorial labors to popular poetry, as we may see in his *English Songs* and his *English Anthology*. But whether he was making one of the many garlands to be incorporated in 1810 in *The Northern Garlands*, or editing Robin Hood ballads and old romances, his work was characterized by an admirable fidelity to recorded sources. “Every poem is printed from the authority referred to,” he writes in the Preface to his *Ancient Popular Poetry*, “with no other intentional license than was occasioned by the desire of contraction, and a regular systematical punctuation, or became necessary by the errors of the original, which are generally, if not uniformly, noticed in the margin, the emendation being at the same time distinguished in the text.” And, again, in the Advertisement to the *Ancient Songs and Ballads*: “But, in whatever light they

may exhibit the lyric powers of our ancient Bards, they will at least have the recommendation of evident and indisputable authenticity: the sources from which they have been derived will be faithfully referred to, and are, in general, public and accessible." In the Preface to his *English Songs* Ritson takes Dr. Arne and Mr. Jackson of Exeter to task for the unwarrantable liberty they assumed in setting English poems to tunes. We might quote further from the articles of his editorial faith; but, when we add that his practice squared with his theory, we have said enough to show that Ritson was the father of all scholarly editors of early English texts.

In the matter of textual criticism Ritson, as has been indicated, sometimes carried the war into the enemy's country. This is notoriously true in the case of his criticism of Percy's *Reliques*. Although he here made the mistake of calling in question the authenticity of the celebrated manuscript, he repeatedly confessed his error after he had been convinced of it. He was never, however, to be persuaded that Percy had not taken liberties with his original copy, of which the Preface to the *Reliques* gave only the most equivocal indication. "The learned and ingenious Bishop Percy," he writes in 1783 in the Preface to the *English Songs*, "has, indeed, published a work, in which a considerable number of songs and ballads, that have never otherwise appeared, are ascribed to a very remote antiquity; an antiquity altogether incompatible with the stile and language of the compositions themselves, most of which one may be allowed to say, bear the strongest intrinsic marks of a *very* modern date. But the genuineness of these pieces cannot be properly investigated or determined without an inspection of the original manuscript, from which they are said to be extracted." Irritated no doubt by the Bishop's air of mystery and wishing to bring him into the open, Ritson four years later poured upon him the canister of his wrath in the first edition of the *Ancient Songs*. But two years after this, in reply to a protest from James Cooper Walker, he writes: "As a publication of uncommon elegance and poetical merit I have always been and still am, a warm admirer of Bishop Percy's *Reliques*, and though I have been persuaded that he has not on every occasion been so scrupulously

attentive to his original, as I think the work required, I shall be very glad to find the idea unfounded, and readily confess that what you have been so obliging as to tell me about the folio MS. has in a great measure removed my prejudice on that head. The limits of a letter will not permit me to enter fully into the discussion of a question upon which I believe a good deal may be said. In the course of some prefatory matter to a book which ought to have come out two or three years ago, but which I hope to receive and have the pleasure of transmitting to you in a short time you will perceive the grounds upon which I have ventured to doubt the authenticity or at least the fidelity of this celebrated publication." On the first of January, 1790, continuing the subject in a letter to the same correspondent, Ritson writes: "I cannot say that my prejudices against Bishop Percy's celebrated publication, which I on many accounts very much admire, are entirely removed. The information you have so obligingly communicated has certainly done a good deal; it has established the existence of the famous folio MS., of which, begging his Lordship's pardon, I had presumed to doubt. The circumstances mentioned by the Bishop, of his being at so considerable a distance from the press is indisputably a sufficient excuse for even more than the mere errors of impression. But you will perceive the justice of confining this excuse to the first edition." In the second edition of the *English Songs*, published posthumously, Ritson declared emphatically: "The existence of this MS., if ever questioned, is now placed beyond the possibility of a doubt." In the meanwhile he had defended himself against Walker, who had written angrily to him on seeing a passage in the Preface to the first edition of the *Ancient Songs* expressing a doubt of the existence of the MS. "The words of my Preface," says Ritson, "are:—'This MS. no other *writer* (not person) pretends to have seen.' Now it would be impossible, or at least absurd, to accept any *but* a writer, i.e. one whose testimony had appeared in print. But it is not the mere existence of the MS. that I dispute; of that I have long had satisfactory assurance. Whether it will, on a careful examination, justify the use Bishop Percy has or pretends to have made of it is a perfectly distinct question." Finally, in the

dissertation prefixed to the *Ancient English Metrical Romances*, he declares that "the existence and authenticity of this famous MS. in its present mutilated and miserable condition is no longer to be denied or disputed";—continuing with fine divination,—“at the same time it is a certain and positive fact, that, in the elegant and refined work it gave occasion to, there is scarcely one single poem, song, or ballad, fairly or honestly printed, either from the above fragment or other alleged authorities, from the beginning to the end; many pieces, also, being inserted as ancient and authentic, which there is every reason to believe never existed before its publication.”

I have quoted at some length from Ritson's prefaces and correspondence in order to make perfectly clear the lines followed by his criticism. The evidence is, in the main, highly creditable to Ritson's acumen and spirit; it shows that he was right in all essentials and that Scott, whose defence of Percy is inadequate in the light of the published folio MS., justly praised Ritson for his candor. In striking contrast to the latter's clean and spirited criticism, is Percy's ambiguity and indirection. This infirmity of the Bishop appears not only in the Preface to the *Reliques* but in the Walker-Percy correspondence. Instead of simply setting Ritson right, Percy commissions Walker to call him off. He sends Walker a letter, which the latter transmits to Ritson above his own name and virtually unchanged. Then out of a suspicious nature, which always breeds suspicion, Percy suspects Walker of duplicity in the matter. Walker can be easily exculpated. It seems clear that he was trying to do Ritson justice and at the same time to keep on good terms with the Bishop. In such an attempt it was inevitable, in spite of his servility, that he should have forfeited Percy's friendship. This seems to have happened finally as the result of a footnote, in which the elegant editor of the *Reliques* found a lurking insult: "After the very strong expressions of respect and regard for the Bishop of Dromore, so ostentatiously displayed in Mr. Walker's letter to Mr. Boyd, Nov. 29, 1904, would it be thought credible that immediately after, in the following spring of 1805, Mr. Walker in his 'Essay on the Origin of Romantic Fabling in Ireland' should call the reader's attention, and in

effect hold up to his approbation, Ritson's scurrilous and abusive attack on the Bishop in the following note at the bottom of his page: '*Vide Ritson's Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy, prefixed to Ancient English Metrical Romances, Vol. I.*'"

Percy was thinking here, of course, not simply of the *Reliques*. Besides the textual question, the Bishop and Ritson were at swords' points on the subject of the estate of the ancient English minstrels. Percy, falling in with the spirit of his time, imaginatively represented the minstrels as an inspired fraternity intrusted with the creation, preservation, and transmission of English national song. This is the poetic figure that so engaged the romantic imagination as to lead to his celebration in more than one well-remembered poem. But the matter-of-fact Ritson would have none of him; he was committed to the facts of the case, not blinded by those fancies to which the romantic whim of idealizing the past so readily yielded. While recognizing the claim of the French minstrel, he regarded his English brother as a person "held in very little if any kind of estimation." He opposed, too, Percy's contention that the minstrels were poets, maintaining that they were not represented to much greater advantage by the early historians than they were in the time of Elizabeth and that, though they could sing and play, "it was none of their business to read or write."

Another *cause célèbre* to which Ritson was a party concerned the origin of romance. Warton, following "Warburton and the Warburtonian school, of which the distinguishing characteristics are want of knowledge, extreme confidence, and habitual mendacity," had declared that romance seemed "to have been imported into Europe by a people whose modes of thinking and habits of invention are not natural to that country. . . . It is generally supposed to have been borrowed from the Arabians. . . . It is an established maxim of modern criticism, that the fictions of Arabian imagination were communicated to the western world by means of the crusade. . . . But it is evident that these fancies were introduced at a much earlier period; the Saracens or Arabians having entered Spain about the beginning of the eighth century." After professing little confidence in oriental origins, and none at all in the literary in-



fluence of the Moors, Ritson goes on to characterize Warton as a "flowery historian," with "a visionary system," "indulging his imagination in reverie and romance without the least support or even colour of veracity or probability." His own position on the vexed question he declares on page 19 in the *Dissertation on the Ancient English Metrical Romance*: "After all it seems highly probable that the origin of romance in every age or country is to be sought in the different systems of superstition which have from time to time prevailed." Neither this judicious statement of his views nor his correction of many errors committed by the historian of English poetry can excuse his asperity and intolerance. Warton's work was difficult pioneer work honestly done. Godwin, who liked the *History* not much better than Ritson, was willing to admit that it merited "to be described as an immense treasury of material." No one now questions its influence in furthering an interest in our early English literature.

The particularity which governed Ritson in the higher criticism made him a fussy stickler in the humble walks of life. What appears in one sphere as critical scrupulousness seems in the other like finical foolishness. The editorial care for an accurate text becomes a personal anxiety about the teeth and the diet. The following bill of particulars we find in one of the critic's letters to his nephew: "1. Never drink tea (especially to your breakfast) nor eat sugar (at least as little as possible, and never by itself.) (Breakfast upon bread and milk, the most wholesome and nutritive diet you can accustom yourself to.) 2. Never hazard your teeth by attempting to crack things which you find too hard for them; and 3, Every morning, as soon as you get out of bed, or the first thing you do, rinse your mouth well with cold spring water. Never neglect this for a single day." Ritson's particularity in the form of calculating prudence is seen again when he advises his nephew against letting his enthusiasm for books take his attention from his business and seems to deteriorate into a mean timidity when, though a professed revolutionist, he advises against a declaration of principles until the cause is virtually won. In general, however, it may be said that Ritson's heart corrected his mental myopia. His creed was

one of loyalty as well as literalism, a loyalty that declared itself now in angry polemic in the public discharge of his critical duties and again in anxious tenderness and compassion for his mother, sister, and nephew. It is this engagement of his passions and his affections in personal and public life that makes Ritson much more than the precisian and the literalist. It enters him as a man in the human record; with his loyalty to our early literature it justifies his place as a romanticist in the literary record.

The strength of Ritson's affections is never more apparent than when they appear in conflict with one of his dearest hobbies. Ritson's vegetarianism amounted almost to a religion. His correspondence tells us that this faith had been inculcated in his nephew, whom he sometimes tenderly addresses as *My little fellow*, whom at other times he treats with an assumed austerity that thinly veils his love for the boy. Taking to heart his uncle's instructions that animals should not be slaughtered for food, the young gentleman had gone so far as to kill a cat that had apparently not accepted the vegetarian creed. This unforeseen result of his teaching worried Ritson so much that he wrote to his sister that the boy had gone "a little too far, in putting his friend Mrs. Wiseman's cat to death for killing a mouse, which, perhaps nature, certainly education, had taught her to look upon as a duty." But not forgetting the mouse, he moralizes in a letter to the young executioner upon "the consciousness of a mind disposed to contribute to the happiness of the minutest being (which I flatter myself you do and will ever possess), which shall afford you a much greater and more heartfelt satisfaction than to be clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day." Evidently Ritson's vegetarianism was much more than a fad.

A more pathetic instance of perplexity relates to an illness of his sister. His letters to this sister are in general very affectionate and he seems to have had considerable influence with her. Under date of April 12, 1782, he urges upon her the reason for abstaining from animal food on the score both of health and of humanity. The appetite he characterizes as an unnatural one and pleads feelingly for the lives of innocent creatures, "to the enjoyment of which they have as good a right

as yourself." However, when Mrs. Frank fell sick and her physician prescribed animal food, her brother quickly relented. "I hardly wished," he writes gently if not quite consistently, "and never expected that my scruples on this head would influence you so far as to make you give up the mode of living to which you have always been accustomed. . . . I only hope and desire that as you relinquished the use of this food out of complaisance to me as a philosopher, you will now revive it out of affection for me as a brother." We have support here, as we have in the tender sensibility of the letters that relate to his mother's illness and death, of his declaration that nothing distressed him "so much as the sickness or death of those with whom [he was] any way connected."

In one of his letters Ritson tells us that portraits of Voltaire, Paine, and Rousseau looked down upon him from the walls of his chambers in Gray's Inn. The trio represent that combination of sense and sensibility which I have dwelt upon as justification for denominating Ritson a romantic antiquarian. It was not only that he was a professed revolutionist and skeptic in matters political and Christian, but that he temperamentally united in his humanitarianism and his rule of reason the enthusiasm and the intelligence of the romantic revolt. The great influences, to be sure, entering the comparatively narrow channel of his life led him to make his hobbies his religion and the letter his law. In a sense he seems like a romanticist in miniature; and we can almost overhear the laughter of an ironic fate as we grow into a realization that this champion of political and intellectual freedom was a spirit in bonds. Some such thoughts, at least, we are likely to entertain as we contemplate in the imperfect portraits of Ritson the strained and eager attention of his face. And yet a sympathetic study of the man's story shows that although he gave much time and anxiety to the minutiae of literary history and everyday living, his life was not really a life of littleness. He was too much of the literalist to accept a religion of mysticism; but for all that he had a faith of earnestness and devotion that made him as true to his family and friends as he was to his texts.

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